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'It's as if you're not in the jail, as if you're not a prisoner': Young male offenders' experiences of incarceration, prison chaplaincy, religion and spirituality in Scotland and Denmark

Abstract

This paper explores Scottish and Danish young male offenders' experiences of incarceration, prison chaplaincy, religion and spirituality. The findings from in-depth face to face semi-structured interviews (n=15) suggest that although Scotland and Denmark are increasingly secular countries the prison environment (deprivation of liberty, vulnerability and feelings of guilt) seems to engender pro-religious/spiritual attitudes and an interest in prison chaplaincy services. Working with inter-faith chaplains enabled the young inmates to take small steps towards managing the social strains that led them into offending, and the 'painful' experiences they encountered during imprisonment. The holistic chaplaincy services that they were offered helped to nurture some initial turning points that stimulated identity and behaviour change linked to transitional masculinity, and in some cases to an increased commitment towards criminal desistance.

Keywords

Spirituality, religion, chaplaincy, masculinity, offending, desistance

Introduction

This paper is based on research undertaken in one young male offenders' institution in Scotland and two remand prisons in Denmark. It explores the experiences of young male offenders regarding the salutary effects of religion, spirituality and chaplaincy on their lives in prison and the extent to which these contribute towards behavioural change and increased commitment to criminal desistance, an issue that has received little attention in the discourse (Sundt and Cullen 2002; O'Connor 2011). In spite of the evidence suggesting that religious or spiritual practices may have a humanizing influence on prisons (Maruna, et al 2006; Schroeder and Frana 2009), in many parts of the world - particularly those that are overtly secular such as Scotland and Denmark - these practices rarely feature within criminal justice policy (see Parkes and Bilby 2010).

In Scotland, although there have been significant reductions in reoffending rates over the last decade, it has been highlighted that the total economic and social costs of offending currently stand at £3 billion, and that young men under 21 years are most likely to reoffend (Audit Scotland, 2012). In Denmark young males below 25 years also reoffend the most (Kriminalforsorgen, 2013). Among Danish prisoners aged 15-20, about 37% reoffend and of those aged 21-30, about 32% reoffend (Graunbøl *et al.* 2010). In Scotland, it is recognised that the prison system has an important role to play in rehabilitating offenders, and that *purposeful activity* should support the development of strengths and potential, as well as addressing risks and needs (Scottish Prison Service, 2014). Purposeful activities are defined as 'any supervised and/or structured activity that contributes to reducing re-offending' (Scottish Parliament 2013: 9). As

part of this approach, prison chaplains are part of a care team within Scottish prisons along with prison officers, doctors, psychologists, mental health nurses, social workers, prison managers and other specialists.

In contrast to Scotland, the Danish prison chaplaincy works independently from the established prison system and the chaplains based within the two Copenhagen prisons that were the focus for our research also work in close collaboration with Katalysator (Catalyst) and Islamic-Christian-study-center (IKS), both non-governmental organisations providing community-reaching support beyond the prison, which includes organising voluntary mentorships for former prisoners.

Scotland and Denmark, with a comparable population of 5.3 million (2011) and 5.6 million (2013) respectively, are largely secular societies (See Hans, 2006; Field, 2001). In Scotland the latest (2011) statistics indicate that within a 10 year period the percentage of the population who identify themselves as Christian has declined from 65.09% to 53.8% while those with 'no religion' have increased from 27.55% to 36.7% (Scottish Government, 2013). In Denmark although most people (83%) are born into the Evangelical Lutheran Church (as the national church) or "Folkekirke", there is a growing Muslim population (4%) and about 1% belonging to Roman Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Serbian Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Baptist, and Buddhist, overall only 42% of the people consider themselves as religious (Niels and Christoffersen, 2012). The work of Rasmussen in Denmark excerpted (Rasmussen, 2010), owing to the secular nature of the two countries' lifeworlds and despite prisoners' interest in chaplaincy services, there has been little attention given to the role of prison chaplaincy and indeed the potential role of spirituality or religion in addressing risks and needs within the Prison Service's vision for purposeful activity delivery and the national criminal justice strategy (see Scottish Prison Service, 2014).

Conceptual frameworks

Crime, desistance and the (de)humanizing of prison culture

It has long been recognised that crime (and particularly violent crime) is often a generational and gendered phenomenon, most commonly associated with youth and masculinity (Honkatukia *et al.* 2007; Holligan and Deuchar 2015). In both Scotland and Denmark, where the data for our research was collected, evidence also suggests that young men are the most likely to reoffend (Audit Scotland 2012; Graunbøl *et al.* 2010). It has been claimed that to 'do crime' is to 'do masculinity' (McFarlane 2013: 321), and that 'young men experience life from a particular position in society and differentially construct cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity' (Messerschmidt 1993: 8). In contemporary western working class communities, hegemonic masculine characteristics typically prioritise physical strength, competitiveness, assertiveness and overt heterosexual behaviour combined with the rejection of femininity and weakness (McFarlane 2013; Holligan and Deuchar 2015).

In considering how best to support young men to desist from criminal offending, it is important to recognize the complex nature of the change process. Research on desistance from crime has traditionally been dominated by life course perspectives

and an interest in how changes in life stages such as entry into marriage, employment or parenthood can function as drivers in desistance processes (Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub, 2005). More recently, however, criminologists have convincingly argued that desistance is not just about transformations of offenders' circumstances. Desistance is best understood as a gradual process, characterised by 'turning points', progression and relapse (Carlsson, 2012), as well as (inter)subjective processes such as cognitive transformations and personal narrative reconstructions of selves and identities (Maruna, 2001; Giordano *et al.*, 2002; Gadd and Farrell, 2004; Sjøgaard *et al.*, 2015). As studies have shown, desistance cannot occur without relevant social, emotional or psychological transitions as well as individual agency and the construction of events as meaningful (Carlsson, 2012; Liebrechts *et al.*, 2014).

Some studies make a connection between prison environment and prisoners' propensity to embrace religion or be involved in other forms of spirituality. These studies describe the dehumanizing aspects of incarceration and indeed prison life related to punishment, social alienation and psychosocial vulnerability (hopelessness, stress, depression and suicide ideation) (Bonner and Rich, 1990). In such environments of deprivation inmates find ways of coping by adapting in myriad ways to their unnatural surroundings (see Clear and Sumter, 2002). One form of adaption but which has so far received little attention in the discourse is the role of spirituality, especially religion, in helping prisoners adjust to the confines of prison life (Clear and Sumter, 2002; Thomas and Zaitzow, 2006).

Thus the well-documented experiences of penal confinement being dominated by 'painful' experiences leads us to believe that more work needs to be done to place an emphasis on nurturing the turning points that may lead to narrative reconstructions that potentially stimulate desistance among young male inmates (Sundt and Cullen, 2002; Cid and Martí, 2012; Liebling, 2014). Hallet and McCoy draw attention to an identity theory of desistance, whereby a decision to stop offending comes after a 'crystallisation of discontent' within the offender in relation to his current identity and a realization of and confrontation with the 'feared self' (an image of what the person does not want to become) as a motivator for self-change (Hallet and McCoy 2014: 4). Creating opportunities for fostering social and human capital via positive relationships and opportunities for personal reflection and introspection in prison may support such processes (see Parkes and Bilby, 2010; Mørck, 2015).

Regarding the role of prison towards desistance, criminological research has provided limited insights into the particular aspects of imprisonment that may help to support the processes of desistance. One exception is the work of Schinkel in Scotland, who argues that the 'extent to which a sentence facilitates desistance will depend on how it is perceived and given meaning'. Schinkel argues that how much an offender loses through imprisonment (including relationships and a sense of self-respect) as well as the resources that are in place to counteract these deprivations will 'influence whether desistance is more or less likely after imprisonment' (Schinkel 2015: 3).

Religion, spirituality and penal welfarism

Scholars such as Durkheim recognise that religion and/or spirituality could be a mechanism for social integration and positive behaviour change (Durkheim 2000). Despite this, there is a distinct lack of knowledge about the role that religion and spirituality can potentially play in prisons as a means of stimulating identity and behaviour change and increasing commitment towards desistance (see O'Connor and Duncan 2011; Hallett and McCoy 2014). While some studies have found evidence that religious or spiritual practices can provide offenders with a positive resource to draw upon in prison which may help to deter conflict and violence among inmates (Kerley *et al.* 2005; Graber 2013), others cite a serious lack of tangible evidence to support their impact on preventing recidivism (see Giordano *et al.* 2008; Whitehead 2013).

However, some studies also contain criticism against prison religion and indeed prison religiosity (Bonner and Rich 1990; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006). For example, two studies have questioned the 'sincerity' of prison conversion arguing that while there could be some genuine 'conversions' the fact that in many cases prisoners become involved with religion soon after incarceration lends hand to the view that many such conversions are directly related to the deprivation of liberty and conditions of prison life. In this connection, scholars such as Clear and Sumter have identified other reasons for religious involvement, which includes prisoners using religion: (a) a form of protection which the band of 'Christian brothers' can provide, (b) for the purpose of meeting women volunteers due to lack of heterosexual relationships in prison, (c) as a way to 'return' to some normalcy when they interact with outsiders, (d) to circumvent prison rules, for example, using it as a shield for gang activity and (e) to receive food (many prison Christian fellowships in the USA provide tea and coffee) and other contraband (Clear and Sumter 2002).

Among the studies that do point towards positive effects, Giordano *et al.* have also highlighted that 'acquiring a spiritual foundation' and religious practice can introduce offenders to strong social bonds which can subsequently support a successful transition to the community following incarceration and increase the likelihood of desistance (Giordano *et al.* 2008: 102). Schroeder and Frana's research in a halfway house in the American Midwest suggests that emotion-coping was the main repercussion to emerge from practicing religion; the emergence of positive feelings such as peace, tolerance and love ultimately helped inmates to alleviate feelings of anger, anxiety and depression (Schroeder and Frana 2009). Similarly, Baker's work with Muslim prisoners found that the emergence of spiritual capital through the discipline of daily prayers brought an increased sense of responsibility to pass on religious ideals to others, while also stimulating feelings of wellbeing, support and fulfillment (Baker 2011). Further, the work of Parkes and Bilby shows that meditation and yoga enabled prisoners to gain a sense of *self-mastery* which led on to increased self-value and an ability to take control of their own emotions in a peaceful environment (Parkes and Bilby, 2010; see also Rucker, 2005).

Despite that practicing religion is not very widespread, for example in Denmark, scholars such as Rasmussen found that a growing number of young ethnic minority men in Copenhagen tended to seek religious knowledge when they were in prison, as

well as other kinds of spirituality including lighting candles, meditation and silence (Rasmussen 2010). Why ethnic minority youth in mainland Europe are more disposed to embrace religion than their non-immigrant counterparts is an issue that has received a fair amount of attention in the discourse and thus should not be repeated here, except to highlight a few common factors. Being separated from their homeland and relatives, religion offers immigrants (even immigrant youths born in host country) a sense of belonging as a response to the strains of adjustment in a new country with a different set of values and expectations. In this way, religious organizations provide a 'trusted' and all-encompassing system of social capital where immigrants form networks of mutual support to help ameliorate the trauma of (re)settlement, which may include dealing with psychosocial issues (stress and other setbacks) but also racism and discrimination (see Werbner 2002; Foner and Alba 2008).

The religious, spiritual and pastoral service of prison chaplains

In his research into community chaplaincy in England and Wales, Whitehead argues that the criminal justice policy and practice in prisons should be 'enriched by the corrective human impulses of mutuality, the offer of supportive relationships ... [and a] basic human understanding of people who offend' (Whitehead 2011: 39). He further observes that due to their independence from statutory services, chaplaincy services may play a valuable role in fostering these very things (Whitehead 2011). Importantly, Whitehead identifies the way in which chaplains offer 'care, supportive relationships and the commodity of time' which is not always available to young prisoners from statutory agencies due to high workload and preoccupation with bureaucratic procedures (Whitehead 2013: 8).

Scholars such as Liebling suggest that chaplaincy work often provides inmates with a much-needed sense of love and trust through focusing on the 'theology of the person' which incorporates a sense of generosity, forgiveness and spirituality (see Liebling 2014: 269). Further, Mears *et al.* highlight that, even where chaplaincy programmes are faith-oriented, the activities they use can be wide-ranging including worship services, Bible studies, seminars and retreats and can rely on a single type of faith-related programming or many types (Mears *et al.* 2006). For her part, in a study of Catholic Prison Ministry in Victoria, Australia, Webber illustrates that inmates found chaplains to be non-judgmental and supported prisoners with practical tasks which helped to establish and maintain trust. In turn, the prisoners' self-worth was enhanced, sense of isolation reduced and some reported feeling calmer, less volatile and able to cope with prison life more easily (Webber 2014).

In the USA, Johnson and Larson's evaluation of Prison Fellowship Ministries programmes identified that young male prison inmates' experience of working with prison chaplains often led them to engage in 'rebiographing' - the holistic provision that they were offered in the form of practical, social and emotional support focused on generosity, forgiveness, [and] 'unearned proactive trust' (Johnson and Larson 2003: 27). They further observed that young inmates' contact with prison chaplains helped them to move beyond the 'prison code' where machismo, violence and

aggression is celebrated among inmates and affection and compassion can be viewed as weak (Johnson and Larson 2003).

Methods and Analyses

Methodological approach and fieldwork sites

In both Scotland and Denmark there has been an increased policy focus on rehabilitation in prisons and due recognition of the role that prison chaplains can play as part of a wider care team (Graunbøl et al, 2010; Audit Scotland, 2012). Despite this, in the two countries there is still a lack of public interest in religion and spirituality's role and its potential impact on preventing recidivism. Against this backdrop, we envisaged our study's core aims as being centred on the illumination of young male inmates' personal perspectives about and experiences of the extent to – and ways in which – prison chaplains may nurture relationship-building, transitions, turning points and masculine identity reconstruction and expression. We were also interested in conducting a critical exploration of the young inmates' perspectives about the role of religion and spirituality within this, and the potential links with fostering desistance-related attitudes.

In Denmark Rasmussen conducted the only Danish study of prison chaplaincy. It consisted of a quantitative review study of 500 prisoners' files, including qualitative personal narratives of more than 150 incarcerated ethnic minority men aged between 15 and 30 in the same two remand prisons that we visited as part of our own empirical work in Denmark (Rasmussen, 2010). As such, we aimed to build upon and extend the focus on Rasmussen's work creating a combined analysis of young inmates' experiences in two countries (Scotland and Denmark) where secularization is dominating, but where chaplaincy services are still operational.

For our present study, throughout 2014 we visited Scotland's largest young offenders' institution on multiple occasions to conduct individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with a small sample of nine (n=9) UK-born young men who were between the ages of 16-21 years, and who mostly came from socially deprived communities from across Scotland. During intermittent visits to Denmark we also collected interview data in two large remand prisons for criminal offenders (including young offenders) through similar types of semi-structured interviews being conducted with six male (n=6) inmates aged 18-35). In the Danish remand prisons we were able to engage not only with young offenders but those slightly older who were able to reflect back on their experiences of progressing through the criminal justice system during their youth. This difference in age is interesting, because Rasmussen found that most of the prisoners became more oriented and open to desistance at the age of 22-23 (Rasmussen, 2010).

Like Rasmussen's study, the two Copenhagen prisons were mainly housing pre-trial prisoners. In both the Danish and Scottish prisons (Christian) pastors (also known as priests and ministers) from different churches were working closely together with Imams (in Islam). At one Danish prison chaplaincy team from the different churches and faiths were sharing the same room furnished in a homely and not institutionalized

style, where they conducted religious and spiritual study groups using texts from various religions. Similarly in Scotland, pastors and Imams shared office space and regularly collaborated on the organisation of study groups.

Criteria for selection of interview participants

The criteria used to select interviewees in both countries was as follows: participants had to have been in prison for a minimum of six months, have had contact and involvement to some extent with prison chaplains and be willing, through a process of informed consent, to talk about their experiences within the context of a 40-60 minute interview. Thus, participants were not selected on the basis of their criminal endeavours or on their ethnicity or religious background or preferences. We were interested in hearing the views of young men who – for one reason or another - had sought out contact with chaplains.

We interviewed participants who came from backgrounds and families with differing and mixed religious beliefs, as we describe in more detail below. We were aware that the young men engaged with chaplains for various reasons. Our intention was not to evaluate whether or not chaplaincy services had any impact on the young inmates or to explore the way in which their contact with chaplains influenced their emerging religiosity. Rather, within the context of the selected inmates' continued engagement with chaplains, our main focus was to conduct a fine grain analysis of the role that they felt prison chaplains played in nurturing positive relationships, supportive transitions, identity change and desistance-focused visions for the future. These themes were part of our semi-structured interview guides used in both countries.

Participant backgrounds

In Scotland, of the nine young men were interviewed only one was of ethnic minority descent. The young Scottish inmates were serving sentences of varying lengths – with the shortest being two years and the longest 13 years. While some had been inside for only a few months when we met them, others had been in prison for up to two years. Just under half of the Scottish sample had charges for sexual offences, while others had been convicted for serious assault and violence, drug dealing and armed robbery.

In Denmark the participants varied more than those in Scotland because their ages ranged from late teens to early 30s. All had grown up in Denmark; one was born in Turkey but came to Denmark as an infant, one was born in South America, but had been adopted by Danish parents, and four had parents from other countries such as Poland, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait and Palestine. Most of the participants had several years of experience in prison, with only one experiencing his first sentence during the time of our interviews. The majority of the participants' criminal charges were related to violence, drug trafficking or in one case kidnapping and terrorism.

Ethics and access

Access to the prisons was granted through the Scottish Prison Service in Scotland and the Danish Prison and Probation Service in Denmark, and ethical approval was additionally gained through the lead author's university and the Danish ethics counsel. Enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks were required as a condition of prison access, and the research participants were recruited voluntarily through material describing the study and issued to inmates via prison chaplains.

Analytic approach

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for ease of data analysis. Data was anonymized and the young male participants were informed of this. Transcription of the interviews was followed by thematic analysis. First, an inductive approach to open and axial coding was drawn upon to identify the most salient themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Second, overarching themes were interpreted in light of the existing literature on chaplaincy services, spirituality, chaplaincy and desistance, thus drawing upon elements of a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, our inductive approach to data analysis was in keeping with the interpretative paradigm suited to privileging participants' perspectives on the common themes that emerged from the data. To preserve the anonymity of the participants in this study, particularly when presenting all verbatim excerpts, we used pseudonyms throughout.

Findings

Relations between inmates and staff: transitions, anxiety and (lack of) trust

A number of the participants, predominantly those who had no previous experience of either being in secure units or prison, found the initial transition into the prison system quite overwhelming. For instance, in both Scotland and Denmark many participants recalled a sense of nervousness, anxiety and stress, while others talked about contemplating suicide due to a mixture of depression, feeling of helplessness and mental health issues (Clear and Sumter 2002; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006):

All of my first sentence I was slightly nervous because I didn't know what to expect ... Due to previous mental health issues, they put me on suicide watch.
(Allan, Scotland)

I don't know how many times I was sitting with my belt you know, I was taking it here and I was just thinking and then like, but I couldn't do it but I just wanted so much, just wished I was dead. (Thomas, Denmark)

Several participants also shared how they actually cried at night, and tried to put up a façade during the day. In our examination of the data, we noted some participants' frustrations targeted at prison service staff for alleged neglect; many felt that officers failed to properly outline procedures and expectations to help the young inmates deal with their feelings of anxiety, pain or stress, but were thankful that the pastors and Imams would help them. Further, several participants expressed their frustrations

towards guards for not fully explaining prison regimes and routines, and in some cases not mentioning services available to inmates. While on the other hand, a number of prisoners who had experience of the prison system spoke about how they would sometimes step in to inform new inmates about prison procedures, daily regimes and routines:

And the guards and all that they are just assholes, every one, all of them. Yeah, when in the beginning they don't know you then they are like, and you just, I just came into this system and I don't know everything and I have to learn all these rules. *(Thomas, Denmark)*

Staff don't explain the regime properly to you. They just lock you up in a cell and that's it. And you need to learn for yourself. So you kinda want somebody to come up and say to you ... 'this is the regime, and this is how it works', and stuff like that. *(Jamie, Scotland)*

In Scotland one participant felt other inmates were in fact not worth talking to other than on a surface level, referring to them as 'fantasists' who focused predominantly on displaying overtly macho behavior in front of each other:

There's only a few mature guys in here ... the rest of them are just stupid and you see they're going to be just coming in and out of jail for the rest of their lives ... they'll watch a lot of gangster movies ... most of the guys pretend ... that nothing will phase them and pretend to be 'Mr hard man'. *(Graham, Scotland)*

The study also revealed that there were some participants who did not talk to other inmates about the trauma of prison life because of their deeply entrenched perceptions of hegemonic masculinity, which included a tendency to reject anything remotely associated with softness or femininity (see McFarlane 2013), as one participant indicated:

... You can't talk about it 'cause then you are looking as a weak person... you have to be cool and strong ... it's bravado ... I'd often sit in my cell and cry in the night. *(Ibrahim, Denmark)*

Especially in the Scotland sample (with the younger participants, age 16-21), we observed the continued need among the inmates to put on an act of masculine 'bravado':

The tension among the prisoners is a lot more tense 'cause (some) people are in there for daein life an' that ... you need to try and show a bit of authority to prove they cannae fuck ye about its bravado. *(Kyle, Scotland)*

Another issue that emerged strongly in the study concerned the absence of trust towards prison guards. Most of the respondents felt that they would be reluctant to

open up to prison officers because they viewed their role as purely custodial and felt many of them were disrespectful and distrustful:

I don't trust people easily so I don't really talk to them about personal stuff ... some of them have been working here a long time so they have their own kind of coping mechanism which is 'everybody's a dick, everybody's a piece of shit' ... so they treat everybody the same. (*Graham, Scotland*)

If you tell the guards here your problems, and so on, he will lock the door and go to his colleagues and tell them that this man has broken. (*Zakir, Denmark*)

In contrast to this, as we will illustrate in the next section, many of the participants showed a great sense of trust in relation to the Imams and pastors.

Chaplaincy, spirituality and (trans) religious traditions

Only two of the nine participants in Scotland came from households where their parents and families regularly took part in religious practice, and in both cases these young men had parental figures whose origins were from outside the UK and had mixed religious beliefs (with Muslim fathers and Christian mothers). However, two of the other young men also admitted having practiced Christianity on occasions before coming into prison. Some others indicated that they had some sense of having a spiritual yearning during their childhood or had been taught informally about God by other family members without actually going to church (see Cid and Martí 2012), while others had no religious background and no prior interest in it at all.

In the Danish study two of the participants grew up in a Muslim home where the family was dutiful in worship, particularly the mandatory Friday prayer at the Mosque. One participant (Thomas) was born in Poland in a Catholic home and later became Christian himself; two of the other participants (Ibrahim and Paulo) grew up in non-religious homes. Although Ibrahim originally descending from Turkey - an Islamic country - he had no exposure to religion in his home when he grew up in Denmark but later as he grew older developed a syncretic understanding of religion drawing on both Islamic and Christian traditions. In Paulo's case, he found religion in prison when he was converted to Christianity (Catholic).

In spite of their variable religious backgrounds, several of the participants (both in Scotland and Denmark) described the way in which they had begun to feel a need for some type of spiritual support (through the chaplaincy) while in prison, even for those who did not have a religious belief. This sometimes came about as a result of bereavement, loneliness or in some cases as a means of seeking peace in times of crisis i.e. trauma of prison life/experience. Rasmussen (2010: 145) found that 12.5% of young inmates with Islamic backgrounds experienced an increased interest in chaplaincy services and Islam while in remand prison, and describes how they tend to 'look more within and upward'.

For other participants in our study, it was their contact with prison chaplains that either ignited or rekindled an interest in developing a spiritual relationship with a higher power through the reading of religious passages (from the Bible or Qu'ran) and

encouragement of prayer. Wider holistic spiritual practices such as lighting of candles, silence, yoga and meditation were at times also advocated (see also Rasmussen, 2010). Ultimately, their contact with chaplains and (in some cases) engagement with spiritual practices brought about feelings of calmness, normalcy, peace, and self-discipline (See also Spalek and Wilson 2001, Rasmussen 2010):

Because he [prison chaplain] was like, he's not judgemental and he doesn't care about what I'd done or maybe done or, he's like he's not judging... he just listens and then he tries to say something positive. *(Thomas, Denmark)*

Most of the time ... I just sit down, have a cup of coffee and just talk about everything ... like I can have meaningful and kind of educational conversations with them ... But then after a while ... I started doing stuff that I know for a fact I wouldn't be doing outside. *(Graham, Scotland)*

Some of the young men we met began to engage in religious services as a result of their involvement with prison chaplains and felt their faith or spirituality grew as a result. For example, in Denmark Paolo, as we alluded to earlier, grew up without a religion but was converted in prison to Christianity, and noted that his new found faith helped him to find peace in God. He also talked about seeking forgiveness from God for all the wrong he did in his life. In addition, he told us that he wore a necklace with the Christian symbol as a constant reminder of his closeness to God. In Scotland, Adam had been a practicing Muslim before going to prison and had been encouraged by the prison Imam to attend Friday prayers.

Allard and Allard suggest in addition to meeting spiritual needs, chaplains also prove to be a source of outlet for social and emotional needs (Allard and Allard 2009). In our study, participants felt they could share personal issues with them and they would remain confidential (as in Rasmussen 2010), and that they offered a listening ear and the opportunity to talk informally in a context which made them feel like human beings rather than prisoners:

... Sitting down wi' the chaplaincy staff, they're confidential ... they massively helped me when my dad was dying of cancer ... and even just good for giving advice. They're so caring and so helpful. *(Lewis, Scotland)*

[Inmates] are seeing people from out of the streets, people who's, who's not here all the time, who's not thinking, 'ah convicts, they are just convicts, have to lock them up', you know. It's not these people so it's very good to have people who, who can talk to you, you know. *(Asif, Denmark)*

Everywhere else in jail, you know, you're in a jail and it feels like a jail. But in here, in here it feels as if you're not, kind of outside in a way, like a bit more relaxed ... they treat you like just a normal ... it's as if you're not in the jail, as if you're not a prisoner. *(Kyle, Scotland)*

Several of the respondents in both Scotland and Denmark felt that engaging with the chaplains had enabled them to re-consider their personal prejudices and values, become more tolerant of others or even to begin to become more comfortable at sharing love, affection and remorse for past deeds:

... While I have been in prison I made a lot of money, but I have also lost a lot. And I have donated 50.000 Kroner to a foundation in Ghana, where they build wells. The reason I did this was to get rid of the money, that I felt bad to have. The money gave me bad karma ... I have definitely gotten some different values. Two, four years ago I would never have given money to some African charity. And now I need the money myself, I don't even have money for a shrink. *(Ibrahim, Denmark)*

I'm not homophobic, I used to be but now ... they showed me not to hate a person just because they're gay or dislike them 'cause that's not the person that he actually is, it's the lifestyle you dislike not the person, so you can't judge the person just 'cause he's gay ... there was a gay guy actually done the yoga with me as well and we end up getting along quite well and all that. *(Graham, Scotland)*

The excerpts above illustrate the ways in which many of the young men felt that engaging with chaplaincy provided them with a space that allowed them to socialize and to consider doing something good to and for others (Maruna 2001). Their interaction with the chaplains was a positive and important catalyst for changing their priorities and their hope for a better life on the outside (Schinkel, 2015). Ultimately, these pastoral engagements enabled the inmates to find common bonds with the chaplains - a fact that led them to feel more comfortable with expressing emotions (Allard and Allard 2009; Whitehead 2011).

Skepticism, (in)sincerity of religiousness and other use of chaplaincy services

Although some of the respondents had, for instance, a Christian background they were generally not overtly religious in prison (this was similar to the findings of Rasmussen 2010 both in relation to prisoners with so-called Christian and Muslim backgrounds). Further, several indicated that it did not matter whether one was religious or not. In Denmark, one respondent observed:

Other inmates don't care whether you believe in a religion, so many Muslims inside there too, they too don't care... I only talk to God alone ... maybe I do in the church house. *(Paul, Denmark)*

Further, some of the respondents had an ambiguous understanding of their religion. Reflecting on aspects of his faith (Catholic Christianity) Said, for example, was skeptical if Jesus was the son of God and doubted the authenticity of the Old Testament:

I never believed the Bible ... I always believe in the part where yeah, Jesus, there was a Jesus and yeah he was God's son and there is a God... But like everything in the Old Testament like, you know that it's like 'ah, that's not true ... and again I'm not 100% sure that Jesus was God's son... or whether, but I know he was there ... but I'm not sure he was God's son ... but at least I believe that yes there is, 400% a God. I just don't know if he was his son ... even though I believe in God. (*Said, Denmark*)

Some used chaplaincy services explicitly for the material benefits it provided:

I started taking part in activities that will benefit me ... (like) yoga. Because when I was younger I was an angry kid so now I'm more calm and all of that. (*Graham, Scotland*)

While others engaged with religion (i.e. prayer) for the psychosocial benefits it accorded:

Only when I went to sleep in the night, I could just pray to God. Pray to protect my family. So that's also prayer, because I had not contacted my family... (*Isa, Denmark*)

Some of the respondents also shared more practical reasons (to deal with the daily drudgery of prison life) for engaging with religion and indeed chaplaincy services. As we have seen Paul (in Denmark), for example, was candid in his view that while at times he prayed in truth religion did not matter that much and went as far as stating that no one really cared whether religion was important or not. For Said (in Denmark) it was the initial reaction to incarceration (being placed in isolation) that made him pray very hard for the 'nightmare' to end but after he was placed in a regular cell he was no longer interested in praying. Said also was skeptical about his Christian beliefs, for example, doubting the authenticity of the Old Testament and whether Jesus was the son of God.

As we have also highlighted, Graham (in Scotland) used chaplaincy services as a way of getting out of his cell, having coffee and talking to the chaplain about 'everything' as a way of dealing with feelings of isolation he had from being separated from family and friends. Further, on his part Isa (in Denmark) said that the reason he prayed every day was for God to protect his family whom he had not seen since his incarceration. The findings here resonate with research that has explored the 'insincerity' principle of some aspects of prison religion, and inmates' manipulation of religion or chaplaincy services for their personal needs (see Bonner and Rich 1990; Clear and Sumter 2002; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006).

Changing identities and commitment to desistance

The participants in the study felt that their involvement with prison chaplains had opened up new possibilities in their minds for coping with life on the outside and

being less volatile and more tolerant. A number of participants reiterated that they would not return to a life of crime after prison, as this excerpt from Ibrahim illustrate:

I wouldn't do weapons or hash ... I want to take (it) out of my old body. I want to be in a new body. I don't want to think about money and all the dirty things I have done. I can easily go and make money by buying hash, but I don't want it, anymore. (*Ibrahim, Denmark*)

Ibrahim's insights provide an important illustration of the way in which some offenders may literally seek to discard 'old selves' and adopt new ones as a means of 'rebiographing' (Johnson and Larson 2003). However, although many participants believed that they had more strength, determination and commitment that could enable them to desist from crime upon release, they also admitted that there were remaining challenges that could prevent this:

They've kind of opened up a new link for me that I didn't see that was there ... But when I get out I know that's going to be a lot, lot harder ... I don't believe I'm strong enough yet purposely or mentally to say 'no' to my closest friends or family and all of that. (*Graham, Scotland*)

Through their involvement in prison chaplaincy and – in some cases - deeper commitment to religious and spiritual practices, some young men in both countries grew to a point where they were able to relate the core themes in the Bible or Qu'ran to their own lives and to make a commitment to seeking new opportunities for repentance. In Scotland, this process was most clearly demonstrated by Lewis (a convicted sex offender). He openly recited his favourite Bible passage that he had come across within a study group coordinated by prison chaplains, and reflected upon how it might relate to his own life:

How many times should I forgive my brother ... seven or seventy seven? That is quite inspiring ... I think they should give them more ... that's helping me change in a lot of ways ... I seek forgiveness, and one day I would love for me to be able to sit down with my victims and say, 'look, I am deeply sorry for what I've done'. (*Lewis, Scotland*)

In Denmark, Thomas also commented on Mathew 4: 2 (Jesus' temptation by the devil) and used this to help him reflect on his life:

And the devil said he was fasting for 40 days and 40 nights and the devil said to him, 'yeah if you are God's son then you can just make the stones to bread and then eat if you are so hungry' ... he chose not to because he wants to be like equal with everyone else and just like even though he can take over this world, he's not going to do so. (*Thomas, Denmark*)

McNeil and Maruna discuss in depth how an individual's desistance from crime must initially involve the need to adopt a new identity, which in turn must be reflected back

on them by others (McNeil and Maruna 2008). As the findings here also illustrate, participants in our study had drawn upon their experiences of religion and spirituality to create new identities which replaced their previous focus on hegemonic masculine ideals – and that their contact with chaplains had helped to reinforce this. Alongside this and despite religious skepticism by some respondents as we have already noted, overall our findings suggest that the young offenders in gained an increased sense of peaceful resilience and inward reassurance from the spiritual practices they engaged with through the prison chaplaincy service.

Discussion

Our research has focused on the incarceration experiences of young Scottish and Danish male prisoners, their perceptions about the support offered by prison chaplains and their experiences of spirituality and religion in penal settings. Once inside prison, many of our participants experienced emotional and traumatic transitional experiences (see Clear and Sumter 2002; Thomas and Zaitzow 2006), and most felt that there was a distinct lack of social or practical support from prison officers or guards (Sundt and Cullen 2002; Van Ginneken, 2015). Many were clearly experiencing transitional identities in the sense that they were seeking to change their social circumstances and behaviour. However, they were restricted in their ability to share experiences with each other due to the ‘prison code’ which prioritises ‘bravado’ and the rejection of open emotional expression (see Maruna 2001). Many also felt that they encountered further layers of stigmatism in prison.

In spite of their variable religious backgrounds and none, the young men sought out support from prison chaplains. Many of these prisoners felt that their meetings with chaplains provided them with a space where they felt safe and human again, and exposed them to comforting, trusting, non-judgemental relationships and feelings of calmness and peace (see also Allard and Allard 2009; Whitehead 2013; Armstrong, 2014; Liebeling, 2014). Against the wider backdrop of the ‘prison code’ and through their recognised focus on compassion and human service, the chaplains often appeared to be viewed by the young inmates as the only potential source of personal support, positive communication and compassion for helping them through periods of loneliness, isolation and/or emotional trauma (Sundt and Cullen 2002).

Maruna *et al.* highlight the way in which some offenders shared reading of the Bible in prison and in the process draw upon the lessons therein as a means of interpreting and making sense of their own struggles (Maruna *et al.*, 2006). Among both our Scottish and Danish participants, we found some examples of this. Within this context, and as a natural extension of their informal meetings with chaplains, some of the offenders we worked with clearly became more engaged in reading religious texts and applying the lessons and insights to their own life circumstances. In one case, this engagement led on to baptismal forms of conversion (as was the case with Paulo in our sample).

In some cases those who engaged with the prison chaplaincy service were sceptical about religion or drew upon it in a very limited way while we also found many instances where prison inmates appeared to gain a deeper and compassionate

understanding of self, others and a greater sense of resilience to deal with the wider prison experience. Some began to adopt new self-narratives that enabled them to find new meaning in their experiences of crime and imprisonment (see Schinkel, 2015).

Moreover, it seemed that initial identity change was occurring among some young men, where they began to feel more comfortable at challenging deeply entrenched views of hegemonic, socially acceptable forms of masculinity, to display increased social tolerance and become more committed towards ‘giving back’ to society as form of ‘retroflexive reformation’ (Maruna 2001: 124). However, many inmates (and most of the younger ones) pointed to the structural and social barriers that they might encounter upon their release that could potentially lead to setbacks and renewed periods of criminal offending.

Conclusion

Drawing upon our empirical insights from Scotland and Denmark, it is possible to for us to begin to add some additional weight to the earlier insights from Schinkel (2015) and Van Ginneken (2015) which connect in-prison experiences with pre- and (projected) post-prison biographies and desistance-related commitment. Our analysis indicates that prisons can become landscapes for resocialisation through stimulating the turning points that may lead young inmates to question their self-identity and offending behaviour. On the basis of this analysis we believe that the continuing work of prison chaplaincy is vital in enabling prisons to realise this rehabilitative, desistance-focused vision for some young men.

While not all respondents were ‘religious’ and others used prison chaplaincy to serve various needs, our overall analysis suggests that working with inter-faith chaplains enabled the young Scottish and Danish male inmates to take small steps towards managing some of the social strains that led them into offending to begin with and some of the ‘painful’ experiences they encountered during their imprisonment (Sundt and Cullen 2002). The holistic provision that they were offered came in the form of practical, social and emotional support, focused on generosity, forgiveness, ‘unearned proactive trust’ and (in some cases) spirituality (Armstrong, 2014; Liebling, 2014). This stimulated social integration and general feelings of normalcy. In many cases the forms of support they offered were unconnected to religion, but arose simply as a result of the caring, supportive relationships, which was not readily available from other sources (see also Whitehead 2013). As such, the young inmates’ views on their sentencing environment took on new importance and meaning and allowed them to ‘make normal’ before potentially ‘making good’ (Schinkel, 2015: 134).

We recognise that wider forms of secular counseling and agency support may offer those same types of supportive relationships to young inmates, and potentially enable them to draw on meaning-making processes that foster desistance-related attitudes and views (Van Ginneken, 2015). However, our insights suggest that prison chaplains provided added value – firstly in the form of the *commodity of time* that they were able to offer to inmates, which is not always feasible among other members of prison care teams (Whitehead 2013). Secondly, it became apparent to us that, in a small

number of cases, wider engagement in religious study and/or spiritual engagement facilitated a deeper sense of peace, wellbeing and fulfillment as well as a broader outlook on future perspectives among inmates who engaged with prison chaplains. We therefore argue that religiosity and spirituality are additional valuable tools that chaplains can draw upon and offer as resources to young prisoners, within the context of a ‘moral prison’ environment, which in some cases may help to nurture initial turning points and stimulate identity and behaviour change linked to transitional masculinity and (projected) post-prison biographies that foreground desistance (Liebling, 2004; Armstrong, 2014).

In order to challenge the entrenched, narrow views of masculinity which so often dominate young male offenders’ social landscapes and increase wider pathways towards criminal desistance, it may be important to widen the provision and reach of chaplaincy services alongside other forms of personal and social support in northern European prisons. Our study suggests that this extended provision by chaplains needs to place an emphasis on personal and emotional support, but with opportunities for religious and spiritual exploration if it is desired and sought. In order to ensure that such provision is underpinned by evidence-informed practice, wider research is needed into the relationship between chaplaincy services, spirituality and desistance across Europe and the wider world.

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